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Braiding a Naturalist's Journey of Embracing Courage

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Braiding a Naturalist's Journey of Embracing Courage

by Rhoda A. Maurer

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A Synthesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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University of Massachusetts Boston

Boston, Massachusetts

Peter J. Taylor, Advisor

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University of Massachusetts Boston

Spring 2015

Braiding a Naturalist's Journey of Embracing Courage

A Synthesis Project Presented

by

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ABSTRACT

Braiding a Naturalist's Journey of Embracing Courage

My synthesis is a sharing of my journey, the accomplishments, struggles and practices essential to embracing courage from a different space of intention, from a space of supporting others, while I continue to journey myself. But it's also a journey of tensions scaffold by walls built long ago that kept my tree from joining a collaborative forest. Through the repetitive process of revisiting, letting gestate, and revising my personal narrative, written papers, professional workbooks and daily writing practice, I share how the Science in a Changing World (SICW) program has manifest in my workplace and a growth of courage to practice. The inclusion of contextual personal narratives I've shared help demonstrate the complexity of how important process is as the structural roots of our learning, ever working to slowly reveal and shape new awareness much like how stories are working on us all the time, reshaping us in the way that flowing water gradually reshapes a rock. I believe story is the connective tissue that builds empathy and support for risk-taking rather than a weakness lacking academic or scientific rigor.

More importantly, what I've come to understand is that just because a story defined me at one time in my life, it doesn't necessarily define me now. Much like a child who speaks later than expected developmental models, I too am finding my voice, my way of finding clarity, through a combination of creative modalities developed asynchronously yet in concert with each other. I share how experiences I once saw as broken limbs on my tree are now gifts in my own personal development. In tree physiology, these wounds compartmentalize rather than heal; they are always part of the tree, but hidden from surface awareness as calluses grow to cover scars. Only later in the life of the tree may these wounds become apparent again when the tree is stressed by wind.

I invite the reader to see extended strands of the braid connected to their own life experiences by paying attention to what resonates or brings up tension for you, noticing the beginning of possible meta-awareness; to make conscious the story just beneath the surface of our talk and invite us to speak it. My synthesis helps readers to connect with an awareness that:

- Story has power to shape our thinking, beliefs and behaviors and that our beliefs can grow but are always connected with the deeper layers of our narratives
- Dreams and burdens are essential to the beauty of the journey
- Courage and empowerment are grown through practice and community
- Co-creative spaces of supportive non-judgment allow for risk-taking as a serious practice of learning and growth
- Others need scaffolding to support their own growth and practice that might be similar or different than our own
- Transparency of intentions may help build community despite tensions of differences

Through my research, I've come to appreciate that my original inquiry is deeply rooted in my quest to understand my own connection with nature in the context of my life purpose and work. And I have been and continue to be on a journey framed in working to support exploration and change at the individual level of awareness rather than the bigger scale of the environmental movement. Yet I've also come to understand that the power of change is held within me and that supporting myself in this environment will translate into supporting others. My capstone synthesis is focused, therefore, on my development as a leader/mentor of people I work with while also honoring my personal development as a reflective practitioner.

subject codes .COM .COR .FRP .RPN .WRL

GRATITUDE

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PREAMBLE

My synthesis this semester has been a process of thinking about how my work in the Science in a Changing World (SICW) experience has manifested in my workplace practice through a process of writing and reflecting upon my personal narrative.

My initial framework to guide my writing attended to:

- Where I was three years ago when I was looking for something to help me grow my thinking and engagement around horticulture, society, processes of leadership and action
- What I learned about myself and the larger connections related to my questions about
- What I practiced and continue to practice that has helped me gain clarity of my values and beliefs
- What I want to bring into my future spaces of engagement with public horticulture and extended communities

To support this inquiry and conduct a review of my experience in the program, I have revisited the written papers and professional workbooks that I have kept during my graduate studies alongside my daily writing practice. Before presenting this synthesis, I have written two more 9,000-word papers and over 35,000 words in my daily writing practice this semester and worked with four different structures, each honoring different parts of the whole as the primary mode of communication. You will see my experience in the SICW program has supported my own transformation into someone more deeply concerned with the process of change and with how best to empower others to grow and direct change. Yet, it is important to clarify that this transformation was not as much a literal change as it was a depth of confidence, clarity, and defined purpose for me in the how of leading

change, a growth of courage. This is not simply defined by the tangible skills that I learned and continue to practice as much as it is about the alignment of heart, mind, and hand I have experienced through the program. I have become empowered through a supportive structure that allows for my individual growth and reconnection with the deeper parts of myself (a belief in myself as an agent of change, but from a position of concern for possibility, a tolerance for ambiguity, and honoring others rather than absolute knowing). The skills I've practiced and the spaces I have experienced have been scaffolds to my own learning, supporting a transformation of my heart and an alignment between my soul and behaviors. This transformation of self has grown to support others in my life through sharing my practice in the forms of various tools and stories.

Because of my experiences within horticulture that acknowledges the importance of creativity, my experiences with the Center for Digital Storytelling, my dialogue experiences in the SICW program, and my experience with photography as a reflective story of the artist, I am drawn to the power of personal narratives as a form of writing that helps to empower the authentic voice of the author. This is explored in more depth, as are other values and beliefs associated with the tools and practices I have grown with during my experience. So the format of this synthesis shares samples of my personal narrative, a tool central to both my process of learning and the depth of self-awareness that I have gained and applied as I have come to understand its complexities over the past three years. These stories are given to the readers so that moments of witness will in some way metaphorically allow the readers to connect with the possibility of change within themselves, scaffolding the readers to listen to themselves and to extend diverse points of potential interaction.

As Christina Baldwin suggests, “We learn that if we have practiced articulating our story, if we have honored the path to this moment by writing it down, the choices

we make are congruent with who we say we are.”¹ I, too, have witnessed a clarity and voice coming from my heart with more ease because of writing. Yet because I believe in the power of story to open the heart, even if the mind does not change, I am attempting to honor using story to open spaces of empathy between the readers and what I have written.

In my workplace, I have hoped that through the practice of listening and witnessing each other’s stories in a supportive space of inquiry, we can begin to create a new collective narrative that supports nature’s health, as well as diversity and humanity’s expression and cultural diversity. I am following a path of crafting a story for the vision of how plant collections and the public garden that I am newly employed at can support biological diversity by strengthening cultural diversity. Bridging empathy between the gaps is the deeper work that story can do by indirect culmination of many small activities, framing change in unpredictable, but real ways.² Catching those beginnings of story, an agency of metacognitive awareness, is fundamentally important to growth that opens insights of learned and ingrained narratives that drive behavior and choices.

So I am attending to the beginning of noticing a new story. Today I am hearing from deeper within how being shut down from music was a shutting down of practice and a shutting down of my courage to practice with others, the biggest mixed message of my life that’s been surfacing over and over again. I am just figuring out how to creatively play in the spaces of adult life through sharing my works in progress in supportive spaces of constructive feedback while also letting go of emotional defenses.

In the next chapters of this synthesis, I will share a loosely braided narrative of three strands that became revealed to me during the process of revising this synthesis. I invite the reader to see extended strands of the braid connected to their own life

¹ Baldwin, C. (2005). *Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*. Novato, CA: New World Library. p.43.

² Lambert, J. (November 2014). Personal Interview.

experiences. At this time, my braid consists of the importance of some primary relationships, searching for my vocation, and building supportive community for my continued growth. I realize that the needs of the readers may at times be in tension with my own process of ongoing synthesis; the readers may be looking for tools for their own application while I will not be prescribing them. Rather, I will introduce tools and my application, leaving the readers to decide how to shape them into their own practice. My hopes are that the readers will read and reread parts of this synthesis as they grow their own lives and practice, finding new questions and deeper awareness with each visit. The structure of this paper will help demonstrate the complexity of how important process is as the deeper underground, like structural roots, ever working to slowly reveal and shape new awareness. Even if readers are not immediately certain how to make sense of this synthesis for themselves, I believe that by paying attention to what resonates, noticing any possible gaps, and seeing what stirs tension, readers can shift into their own meta-awareness. This will also make conscious the story just beneath the surface of our talk and invite us to speak it.³

³ Baldwin, C. (2005). *Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*. Novato, CA: New World Library. p.30.

CHAPTER 1 TWO IMPORTANT FRAMES

Why Story?

When I was young, my father would always tell stories. I'm not talking about the stories typically shared with a five year old... he told those too. Rather, he would tell stories that exaggerated reality – and the entire family knew it. And no matter how many times, and still to this day, he doesn't see his exaggeration. For him, this is reality. So, at a very young age, I was aware of the power of perception. As an adult, I attribute this trait of his as part of his artistic expression and sometimes as a method he uses to get his way (even if he is not aware of his metacognitive process). Yet as a child I felt a double-edged message of right and wrong, of lies and truth.

Prior to my acceptance into the SICW program at UMass Boston, I had participated in two Center for Digital Storytelling workshops where I witnessed first hand the power of creating a personal narrative in the space of a supportive exploration of meaning-making and sharing. Yet the most revealing insight I've experienced through the putting back together phase of the SICW experience is that stories are not sufficient for personal and social change on their own. Nor are writing papers in academic formats ad nauseam helpful to bring the participatory experience of story-making into the deeper understanding of its important role in helping us gain better metacognitive awareness of our personal narratives. Only through the *process* of story-making *in supportive creative community* do we begin to open ourselves to seeing anew. For it is the re-assemblage through the right kind of supportive spaces that can be profound. This re-engagement is critical to allowing us (me) to build and deepen our (my) understanding of ourselves (myself) as agents of change.



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"If you don't know the trees you may be lost in the forest, but if you don't know the stories you may be lost in life." ~ Siberian Elder

Vivian Paley advocates for the importance of “those of us who truly do believe that play and its structure – story – are the wheels that go around, the connective tissue,

don't spend enough time explaining it to each other in story form."⁴ Instead, we are structuring discussions in places where the vulnerability of story and play are seen as weaknesses and lacking academic or scientific rigor. What is harder to see, and perhaps more impressive, Gottshall suggests, "is the way stories are working on us all the time, reshaping us in the way that flowing water gradually reshapes a rock."⁵



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⁴ Paley, V. G. (1997). Story and play, the original learning tools. Walferdange, Luxembourg. Retrieved from <http://www.script.men.lu/documentation/archiv/decoprim/paley.htm> p.4.

⁵ Gottschall, J. (2012). *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. p.153.

"The camera is an instrument that teaches people to see without a camera." ~ Dorothea Lange, documentary photographer and photojournalist

Why Science in a Changing World?

Historically, many well-known public gardens were created by the transfer of a private garden after the death of the owners. These gardens had often been established from the vision and resources of one person or family. While the wonder of their vision as a piece of art, a historic tribute, or living collection of biodiversity is something valuable to share with others, the reality and complexity of the perpetuity of the garden is problematic. Why? Because it often relies on the philanthropy of people to support it and this can drive the future vision at the expense of the public it was intended to be gifted to serve. Rarely do public funds support public gardens, except when the garden is owned by a public entity. Those that are built from the ground up with public funds often don't have enough to be sustainable. So the questions become as follows: what is relevant enough for the public to find important to support? How do we connect with a new philanthropy... people interested in a different vision, not just the prestige of showcase that is deeply rooted in private garden plant collecting? Fundamentally, I was questioning how public horticulture might relate to larger socio-economic and biological systems in a growing atmosphere of disconnect with nature. There is a new frontier of engagement and community that contradicts with its current and historic roots in philanthropy, suggesting a re-examination of what our collective and individual gardens' cultural values might be. At the root of this for me is the importance of how to explore and implement change. I believe this cannot be a top down instruction or hierarchy as mirrored in historic Western management practices.

CHAPTER 2 - CONTEXTUAL STORIES PART OF THE BRAID

December 2011

I haven't known what to post for a long time [on this blog]. You see, I was hit with a bomb in late October... "You're being laid off in two weeks." And while this isn't nearly the worst thing that could happen, I still found myself confused about how a place I put so much of myself into could let me go so easily and scared about how I was going to make ends meet and keep food on the table. I don't have an emergency fund since I was investing in the development of my photography and counting on the full-time job's monthly salary to live. As many people know first-hand themselves, this is not the best time to be needing to look for work in America, let alone in the field of public horticulture, one of the many areas hit hard by budget cuts and philanthropic decline. As I grew past the shock and initial fright over the last two months, I realized that unemployment will help for a while and I have a loving partner who will not let me go hungry or without shelter, a gift I cannot be thankful enough for.

I had already applied to distance learning graduate school in September, wanting to pursue an advanced degree in Critical & Creative Thinking at the University of Massachusetts while working, bridging horticulture and photography in a personally meaningful way that would help advance my career. Last week I received the wonderful news that I have been accepted for the program. But the layoff has removed my funding sources and I need to brainstorm some funding possibilities while looking for employment and trying to sell photographic prints. I'm committed to finding a creative solution, but welcome any advice in this area since it's been years since I've been in the scholarship/granting circles.

So with all these details running in the background and the holidays slowing any progress on the job front, I find myself wondering what winter this year will be like. I've been running at 100 mph most days these past two months looking for employment. But the holiday week has been a real gift, a time to slow down and reflect, a time to really talk with those closest to me. The time between has begun... a time between to awake my soul.

Winter will be time to think, to ponder, to photograph... to listen to myself closely, to reconnect with my truth, and discover a new direction on my path. I've been reflecting on how many

people define themselves by the work they do, rather than the person they are before work. Don't get me wrong; I've always enjoyed work. But work is something to do to earn a living in this world; it's something you do, not something you are. So now I find myself wondering more than ever how I want to spend the next 50 years of my life. I know this about myself. I need to create. I need to connect with nature on a spiritual level. I need and value the people close to me. I also have faith in the process, so I don't doubt that things will work out well and that the journey will be one I will learn much from. But it's still difficult to make time for meaningful reflection and imagining what could be... but this week of reflection has reawakened just enough of my soul that I cannot help but commit to making time in January, winter, so I'll be ready for whatever spring gifts me.⁶

October 2013

Tonight I'm in a place of Work In Progress ideas wandering in and around my mind... As I search for a format to scaffold the WIP, I am thinking about something written, but more like a story. I've never written anything fictional, as I prefer to ground stories in reality and connect what might at first seem disconnected into something unexpected. As I mentioned in our emails, fiction would be a lot harder for me, and I want to answer your question about what I think depth might include in story. The 3-D scaffolding modality that I seek in stories comes in when there are multiple possible connections or interpretations connected to the story; it's not so linear and allows people to connect in complex emotional ways tied to personal values. There is possibility of bringing new insight into something not seen before, something that at first seems superficial would somehow connect to the human condition; there would be wonder.

As we have now moved through two related Collaborative Explorations on story and scaffolding learning, and we have grown space for authenticity and trust, I would like to continue the dance and hope that you will be open to an ongoing exchange of ideas with me, a dance in the spirit of exchanging ideas and not keeping track of who is getting what. Keeping track is a destructive exercise. So I follow [another] suggestion and continue the dance; I offer some of my raw thinking as it currently relates to storytelling and scaffolding in the context of today, built on past CEs. But obviously much of what we have each built is rooted in our past experiences as well.

⁶ Maurer, R. (Dec 2011). *A Time Between*. Rhoda Maurer Photography Blog
<https://ramaurer.wordpress.com/2011/12/30/a-time-between/>

And the seasonal cycle of scaffolding means it will continue to grow, become clarified, and stirred up and confused over and over again! So in this dance I'll offer some backstory, because the transparency of our thinking is often helpful in ways we don't realize, both for our own learning process and that with others. I just hope that this transparency does not become a bore and that I am able to appropriately estimate how much to share.

As my scaffolding tree has continued to grow, both above and below ground, to include mathematics and social change both visually and theoretically through the connections you and others have sparked, I've found unexpected meaning in sharing the struggle for transformative learning with others.

And recent experiences I once saw as broken limbs on my tree are now gifts in my own personal development. In tree physiology, these wounds compartmentalize rather than heal; they are always part of the tree, but hidden from surface awareness as calluses grow to cover scars. Only later in the life of the tree may these wounds become apparent again when the tree is stressed by wind.



©2013 Rhoda Maurer created during Scaffolding CE October 2013

My life has been an amazing turn of events, something the tide has brought to me, slowly and methodically on her own terms. And like Peter Bregman's article about procrastination and surfers he watched one morning, what resonates is "No matter how good, how experienced, how graceful they were on the wave, every surfer ended their ride in precisely the same way: By falling."⁷ So today I venture into giving myself the time to ride, practicing despite falling, with less concern for cultural expectations of what I am supposed to do. So, in the spirit of non-judgmental sharing, I hope to dig deeper into the understanding of my own scaffolding and personal narrative as a way of thinking about why and how they are constructed for others.

It's only been since last June that I moved from Pennsylvania, and so much has transformed in my life. As I see those 14 years in Pennsylvania now, they were full of a dichotomy of confinement and growth that ultimately stifled my true self in many ways. Those closest to me always knew photography would help me grow, but nobody could have foreseen in what ways. If I look further back, I was fortunate to have a mother and father who believed in nurturing wonder at a young age. I am thankful for the mentors who cared enough to share of themselves beyond their guarded spaces of decided thinking, who shared their authentic selves as a gift and without expectation. I am thankful for friendships that have helped sustain my dreams and always keep me thinking with possibility.

I am finally allowing myself to feel grateful for the loss of my job two years ago. As you know, this was a turning point in my life when I was able to let go of a dead-end job and toxic workplace. Although I grieved these losses, I found new insight and strength through the honoring of these feelings, new scaffolding, and both new and enduring friendships built in concert with my graduate studies, opportunities to develop my own leadership, and opening to see some of my own potential in new ways. Of course, this potential was always there, but we build our own blind-spots that are difficult to acknowledge and move beyond. Sometimes the scaffolding is too rigid and needs to be deconstructed in order to see anew. Maybe it was pure naïveté, following uncertainty, but maybe it was the pull of nature herself, rooted in deep seeded identity surfacing to share with others. I'm learning that we often don't necessarily know what

⁷ Bregman, P. (2013). The Unexpected Antidote to Procrastination. Retrieved May 2, 2015, from <https://hbr.org/2013/05/the-unexpected-antidote-to-pro/>

we need or when we need it. But that only through the practice of listening do we have the possibility of hearing.

*I connected with Barry Lopez's story of watching a river, because I have been an observer of nature from a naturalist's perception all my life. As he suggests, "... the more knowledge I have, the greater becomes the mystery of what holds that knowledge together... The longer I watch the river, the more amazed I become (afraid, actually, sometimes) at the confidence of those people who after a few summer seasons here are ready to tell the county commissioners emphatically, what the river is, to scribe its meaning for the outlander."*⁸

I often reflect back to days I felt total awareness in the presence of nature. The world has so many things yet to discover if only we open our eyes to wonder. Looking at my narrative again, I still have a discomfort in rigid scaffolding concepts. I find comfort in the cyclical nature of seasons and life events. The seasons are something I can count on... unlike the experience of my teenage years and the compound lack of support for my dreams. The breakdown of my family and forced social expectation of helping my newly divorced grieving mother with raising a newborn baby brother have built some strong scaffolding of its own.

I don't make meaningful friendships easily, although I can make acquaintances as smooth as milk pours from the milk jug. Yet when I do open myself up to giving, I give deeply. And this builds those chosen close connections I do have in my life. As I've learned more and more about others and the authentic connections of being human, I am opening myself more and more to sharing more and more with others in hopes not so much of helping myself, but of genuinely helping others find meaning for themselves. I don't want children or adults to feel helpless in their learning or life stories.

Somehow I've been fortunate to find spaces grounded in life's grace. Being in spaces of authenticity with others, where motivations and games were not manipulative, but transformative to people's growth and potential, were essential to learning that even bad things can be

⁸ Lopez, B. (2014). *What I Learned From 30 Years Of Watching A River*. From The Daily Good Blog at <http://www.dailygood.org/more.php?n=5151>

experienced through a positive lens. It is interesting to think about what we find comfort in and what we guard. The only concepts I have come to believe is that there is change, people will always have different ways of expressing the same things, and that we are all connected through what it means to be human.



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Two autumns ago I found myself crying in the Sierra Nevada Mountains on one of my photography adventures because I realized I could no longer control what was emerging inside me. I had to let go and allow something else to come.

A good friend of mine once suggested I was fleeing jail the week I left for Upstate New York. And while I am still in a place of confusion about what that next path on my journey might be, I know this time of confusion is necessary and a gift of its own. In many ways I am honoring my roots for the first time after a venture into the wider world. And at the same time, I'm becoming a reflective practitioner, an artist, and acknowledging my whole person, not just one part of me at a time, as I've tended to do in the past.

I'm beginning to feel this letter has rambled long enough; I don't want this to be a diary of sorts, but rather bringing a story into a space of exploration with others, to share our vulnerabilities enough that others feel trustful enough to engage in support of each other's growth. So I still have questions about how we ensure that the space and intent becomes alive rather than muffled in ourselves. Maybe your butterfly is a metaphor for the possibility of merging identity in this space of discovery? Or maybe my tree needs to be seen among the forest? If our work is only as good as the inspiration we find in the life we lead, then I must dance. I don't have answers about how scaffolding is related to story other than through my own experience. And the only way I see to expand my understanding is to dance with others. Thank you for dancing with me.⁹

January 2014

In my young adulthood, I refused to lose touch with wonder despite a middle-class message of adulthood as a servant of the workforce. Thankfully, and from the guidance of my parents, I was never able to do a job just for the reward of a paycheck. My grandmother's words still resonate with me today, "Money will never buy you happiness, but it can make life a lot more comfortable. This will be something you will struggle with in your adult life. Be careful to choose what is right for you." My family story was full of these double messages:

⁹ Maurer, R. (2013). *A Moment in Time*. Written as a work in progress for a Collaborative Exploration: Scaffolding Creative Learning. Hosted in October 2013 by CCT program of UMass Boston.



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- *You are smart; make the most of your education so you can get a good job. When are you going to get married and have a family?*
- *Do what you love, follow your heart and the money will follow. You are a talented musician, but you won't be able to take care of yourself being a violinist.*
- *You are an artistic child with a creative imagination and gifted with lots of available choices. You need to choose one thing to do for your career and focus your entire life on that or you will fail to have monetary security.*

But I always found solace in nature; nature, no matter how small, was always my comfort after my great-grandmother passed away. Nature never lied to me. Nature never mislead me. Nature was just there as supportive arms to discover more about myself through being with her. So is it so difficult to understand why I kept her close?¹⁰

¹⁰ Maurer, R. (2014). From my daily writing journal.

Early January 2015

I am in winter right now; the earth is in winter right now. But I can feel spring around the corner, even though we have only past through mid-January. Winter is deeply contemplative. But it's a time when we need to honor the stillness we need in our lives that the earth reminds us of during this season of calm, barren structure and silence. Winter three years ago I noticed this stillness and the need to honor this in myself to feel the transition happening inside me. And now I find myself in this same place as I transition into this new job.

Letting go in winter, of what I have experienced, feeling it all, sitting with those feelings for a while and allowing what comes from it to surface into awareness, into the mind... We can build scaffolds of support, distrust, or hypocrisy through the stories we create.¹¹



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¹¹ Maurer, R. (2015). From my daily writing journal.

Late January 2015

The values that I bring to the principles I hold central to how I practice leadership have grown from a place of personal desire to find meaning, purpose, and community for myself. And these principles are framed in the context of my life's experiences and choices in which I have had my share of loss.

- *Divorce of my parents*
- *Loss of my childhood - surrogate mother to my youngest brother*
- *Musical career dream smashed by mixed messages*
- *Loss of my self-confidence and a cry for help*
- *Near death experience and reality of "friends"*
- *Loss of my great-grandmother*
- *My family spread out across the country*
- *Loss of my identity that I attached to my work*

Yet in each of these life experiences, I chose the way of being my great-grandmother inspired me to follow; value life as a gift and process of discovery. Hold an attitude of continual inquiry and tolerance. Find and honor the beauty in everything and everyone and love unconditionally. Places with nature, often alone, became a place to nourish and heal my soul. And the seed for this connection was sown when my parents would travel the back roads of the U.S., selling their wares or taking my brother and me on one of the summer adventures they desperately sought to keep despite having children. When my great-grandmother Lucy died when I was 20 years old, I felt alone and relied upon nature to help heal my deep wounds. I built a wall between any real belonging for me with other people.

Horticulture inevitably lit a fire within me and sustained me through most of my adult life. I was finally able to grow lasting and deep friendships through reconnecting with an awareness of the cycles of our journeys and the cycles of the natural world. Yet it took three very important events to bring me out from behind my biggest walls: meeting my life partner, immersing myself in photography, and later finding words and the practice of writing during my graduate studies. Joe

gave me the support and love I was missing my whole life, permission to be me without judgment and with full support of my dreams.



©2014 Rhoda Maurer

When people ask me why I photograph, I usually try to coin a short explanation about my work experience in horticulture and my upbringing in an artistic family. These explanations really just serve as a superficial answer to engage people in polite conversation. I believe in, and appreciate, the magic of catching and re-crafting stories built from experiences of story circle empowerment. Photography has become a way of telling my own stories, expressing the wonders that speak to my heart and their relationships with me. I value the uniqueness of people and the personal experiences and narratives they have crafted for their lives. And I've come to understand the strengths of vulnerability, allowing myself to act upon my dreams rather than keeping them in the closet, connecting with purpose.

Today I am trying to lead more from my heart, to help build scaffolding for trust and risk-taking, both for myself and the community where I work and live to help us all navigate the exploration and synthesis of finding life purpose, thus empowering people to feel a sense of safety, belonging, and appreciation. For the first time in my life, I feel the values I hold dearest, the support I need to be authentic to myself, and the values of the organization I work for are in alignment. Instead of trying to "fit in," I am journeying into a space where by honoring my gifts

and purpose and choosing supportive actions, the “right” communities will grow alongside feeling engaged in something worthwhile.

For me, the metaphor of the scaffold branches of a tree helps to explain my understanding of the value and relationship of community to finding meaning in one’s life. The scaffold branches are often referred to as the primary supports from which the smaller branches develop and grow. And it’s interesting to consider that as members of a Western culture, we tend to focus on the “upward” direction of scaffolding when in many cases the scaffold that might be more important in many situations (including the tree’s) is the health of the network of scaffolding below ground... if you consider the longevity of the tree’s life, the health of the roots and the uptake and availability of needed nutrients through its transportation system of xylem and phloem are primary. It’s important to recognize that the above ground and below ground parts are all part of the whole and needed by each other much like we need community and community needs our best selves. And like the beauty of the seasons in which a tree lives, meaning and purpose cannot be without the presence of both our dreams and burdens.¹²

Last Week of January 2015

... There was little excitement in the room about our accomplishment as a team and the facilitators asked us why. It didn’t take long for me to open up and share. “What happened here... this was a simpler version of exactly what happened for me in the morning session. Here we focused on the task accomplishment as the goal at the sacrifice of something else. And that something else was the foundation of the stepladder, the foundation of process, the foundation of people.

We accomplished our task at the expense of people. We accomplished a task I could care crap about and we overlooked the potential of building something lasting with greater impact to the system and group dynamic. We missed the opportunity to build empowerment, engagement, collaboration, and a supportive space for working together.”¹³

¹² Maurer, Rhoda. (2015). Written as background to crafting my own leadership definition at Harold D. Craft Leadership Training, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.

¹³ Maurer, R. (2015). From my daily writing journal.



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February 2015

Why do I still struggle to accept my part in the good things that I've done in the past three years? Often when people help me see this, I'm surprised that they see me as a pivotal player in the shift. Why does my inner voice still question this? Didn't I set forth to create a place and culture that I wanted to be a part of and that honored each person's contribution? So why should I be surprised it worked? Joe reminded me that it's part of what I bring because it's part of who I am and what I value and practice... it's what I hold as a central principle to every encounter and every challenge I had. Do I struggle to allow myself the same value as I give

others? Or am I simply so focused on the process I forget to stand back and view from the outside?

I see a change in my confidence and own thinking - this is probably more accurately stated as I see the value in being comfortable with sharing my own process and allowing for collaborative approaches to feed me and to feed others. I have a better sense of allowing for imperfection while not giving up on the striving. The product can be imperfect while the persistence in seeking must be practiced. Fundamental to my willingness for action was a supportive practice of participation, witness and hosting dialogue circle in many classes, workplace opportunities and the NewSSC Workshop for Science and Social Change.¹⁴

March 2015

Writing was never a strength of mine, or so I was told in grade school... my grades in English were always lower than my grades in science, math, music and art. I always struggled with vocabulary and I took this as part of my identity; later I learned this experience is coined asynchronous development, not inability. More importantly, what I've come to understand during my graduate work is that just because this story defined me at one time in my life, it doesn't necessarily define me now. No, writing is central to building the clarity of my learning so that I can share my thoughts with others. And professional peers are confirming I'm good at it. Much like a child who speaks later than expected developmental models, I, too, am finding my voice, my way of finding clarity, through a combination of creative modalities developed asynchronously, yet in concert with each other.¹⁵

¹⁴ Maurer, R. (2015). From my daily writing journal.

¹⁵ Maurer, R. (2015). From my daily writing journal.

CHAPTER 3 - IRREDUCIBLE, CONTINGENT, INTERACTIVE, CHANGING PARTICULARITY

By living life as inquiry, Judi Marshall, Program Director, Leadership for Sustainability at Lancaster University, suggests strategies and ways of behaving which encourage us to live in continual process, adjusting, seeing what emerges, and bringing things into question.

It involves seeking to maintain curiosity, through inner and outer arcs of attention, about what is happening and what part [you are] playing in creating and sustaining patterns of action, interaction and non-action... It involves seeking to pay attention to the stories [you] tell about [yourself] and the world and recognizing that these are all constructions, influenced by [your] purposes and perspectives and by social discourses which shape meanings and values.¹⁶

It is about finding out *who you are* rather than trying *to be something*. It is about giving up the praise, gain, fame, and pleasure that lead to grasping, tension, and losing track of your true self. “It’s to swim against the stream of what we’ve often been told, and to treasure your life and how it feels to relax, be touched by beauty, develop your talents, and feel your connections to others.”¹⁷

When I first heard this phrase, “irreducible, contingent, interactive, changing particularity” as part of a supportive exchange of ideas in a Collaborative Exploration centered on Scaffolding Creative Learning in the summer of 2013, I was confused by what this characteristic might mean to my own way of being. It felt like a label alongside other labels that others used to define me, something that I needed to explore. Why do people seem to have a need to categorize things and people?

¹⁶ Marshall, Judi. 1999. “Living life as inquiry.” In *Systemic Practice and Action Research*. Vol12.no2. pp155-171.

¹⁷ Kasl, Charlotte Sophia. January 2005. *If the Buddha Got Stuck: A Handbook for Change on a Spiritual Path*. Penguin Books. p.57.

Many people have tried to answer that question, from author Jonathan Gottschall in his book The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make us Human, psychologist Carl Jung and others with the development of constructivist psychology, and Margaret Wheatley, co-founder and President emerita of The Berkana Institute, through her explorations of leadership, influence and control. But two stories centered in understanding nature help frame what it means for me.

The author Carol Kaesuk Yoon wrote, "*Umwelt* [pronounced OOM-velt] is a German word that means literally 'the environment' or 'the world around', but scientists studying animal behavior use it to evoke something much more specific. For these biologists, the *umwelt* signifies the perceived world, the world sensed by an animal, a view idiosyncratic to each person, fueled by its particular sensory and cognitive power and limited by its deficits."¹⁸ Once you start noticing organisms, "once you have a name for particular beasts, birds, and flowers, you begin to see the shape, the natural order of living things. You begin to notice life where it is, all around you."¹⁹ I suggest that the *umwelt* can be witnessed through story and through experiences of wonder. I knew, before I knew about the idea of a human *umwelt*, that giving names to plants as an adult when I returned for my second undergraduate degree in horticulture was an extension of my childhood longing for feeling wonder and understanding of our natural world. "Once you learn its name, its shape, its meaning, you begin to see it everywhere. Those rare remaining naturalists know it too."²⁰

"May your search through Nature lead you to yourself" ~ Author Unknown

So when I think about irreducible, contingent, interactive, changing particularity in this context, I've come to understand that this tendency not to simplify, to value the

¹⁸ Kaesuk Yoon, C. (2009). *Naming Nature: the Clash Between Instinct and Science*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. p.15.

¹⁹ Kaesuk Yoon, C. (2009). *Naming Nature: the Clash Between Instinct and Science*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. p.298.


²⁰ Kaesuk Yoon, C. (2009). *Naming Nature: the Clash Between Instinct and Science*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. p.298.

unforeseen interactions and unpredictability of things, and the uniqueness and value of each person's contribution to the world is also grounded in my search for maintaining wonder in my life. I am not a scientist in the narrow academic sense. Yet I am an attentive observer of our natural world. As I've struggled to find my way, and as I've come to learn that the struggle is part of my own perception, I've found new ways of engaging with others that honors their individuality and supports my expression as well.

CHAPTER 4 - ANOTHER LOOK AT THE COMPLEXITY OF OUR JOURNEYS

I've been thinking about circles of leadership, community, the natural world, my choice of profession, and a vision for the future of public horticulture for some time. I'm coming to realize that the experience in the SICW program is another circle; a circle of gaining tools, processes, and clarity to support organizing my mind and the actions that lead from my heart. I first visualized these circles connected through a complex spherical layering. Yet the visual that best represents how I currently understand the complex relationships of theory, practice, and our lives now resembles the vegetable Romanesco.



 Taraji Blue on Flickr at <https://flic.kr/p/9biSZx>

This exotic variant of cauliflower demonstrates a complex of the Fibonacci sequence and fractal geometry. I can spiral up or spiral down the florets and take a different path interconnected with every other path at any time. Inward spirals may be more about getting clear about the authentic me, while outward ones might be providing more and more hand holds for readers to be scaffolded by me into their own meaning making. When cutting this vegetable in half, it also resembles a simple coniferous tree, adding to the complexity of spiral direction with tree root and branching pattern scaffolding.



 Feliciano Guimarães on Flickr at <https://flic.kr/p/6SYC9B>

The change of mind I have developed through the graduate program does not represent anything better than I have ever been. It represents another place on the path towards living an authentic, undivided life that links circles of concentrated attention in the larger network of spirals. I have gained a depth of understanding that my tolerance for differences is really a tolerance for ambiguity.

Yet when we understand winter in the natural world, we realize that what we see out there is not death so much as dormancy... But much of it has gone underground, into hibernation, awaiting a season of renewal and rebirth... Spring is the season of surprise when we realize once again that despite our perennial doubts, winter's darkness yields to light and winter's deaths give rise to new life. As spring's wonders arise from winter's hardships, we must hold to live life fully and well – and to become more confident that as creatures embedded in nature, we know in our bones how to hold them... Summer is the season of abundance and first harvest. Having traced the seed of true self on its arduous journey from birth, through death and dormancy, into flowering, we can look at the abundance that has grown up within us and ask, “Whom is this meant to feed? Where am I called to give my gifts?”... The idealists among us tend to ask the “whose” question prematurely: we want to serve the world's needs, but we burn out trying to do more than we are able. I cannot give what I do not possess, so I need to know what gifts have grown up within me that are now ready to be harvested and shared. If the gifts I give are mine, grown from the seed of true self, I can give them without burning out. Like the fruit of a tree, they will replenish themselves in due season.

~ Parker Palmer, founder and Senior Partner of the Center for Courage & Renewal²¹

More often than not, I'm finding myself realizing that the people with whom I most deeply connect with are those who are comfortable with ambiguity, those people who are learning how to hold space and manage the experience of life's tensions, people who value that living life is a creative act, always growing and always connecting from past history in new ways as we move through life. Christina

²¹ Palmer, P. J. (2004). *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. pp.82-84.

Baldwin, author and co-founder of PeerSpirit, would name them fellow storycatchers.

*Storycatchers are intrigued with making – perhaps driven to make – sense of experience and to make stories out of our sense. Storycatchers are: Intrigued by human experience, inquisitive about meaning, insight and learning, more curious than judgmental, more in love with questions than answers, empathetic without over identification, able to hold personal boundaries in interpersonal space, able to be present while others experience emotions, able to be present while others have insight, able to safeguard the space for listening, able to invite forgiveness, release and grace, aware of story’s power and use it consciously, practitioners of the heart of language.*²²

~ Christina Baldwin

Our work will never be done. Unlike traditional story structure where there is a plot, rising complex problem often grounded in conflict, and a resolution or moral learning, a life story is not a linear structure, nor does it have one definitive lesson. Instead, the beauty of practicing is the fundamental story. Through my own life experience, I know story has the power to open the heart, even if the mind does not change. Baldwin again writes:

*Story is empathy in action between people... Storycatchers are people who value story and who find ways in the midst of their everyday lives to honor this activity. They signal to the rest of us that something important is happening in the moment and invite us to notice and pay attention... The storycatcher’s job is to help us shift into narrative; to make people conscious of the story just beneath the surface of our talk and invite us to speak it.*²³ ~Christina Baldwin

²² Baldwin, C. (2005). *Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*. Novato, CA: New World Library. p.29-31.

²³ Baldwin, C. (2005). *Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*. Novato, CA: New World Library. p.30-46.

CHAPTER 5 - CALMING AND USING FEAR

Tools and Fears of Practice

Freewriting, Dialogue Process, Daily Writing and Critical Friends²⁵ were some of the greatest and most effective supportive actions I practiced during the SICW program that have supported me in finding clarity of my own thinking and in supporting others with theirs. For those interested, I have included a summary of how the tools have been used outside my SICW classroom experience in the Appendix; an outline of the tools and processes themselves can be found in Taylor and Szeiter's book, Taking Yourself Seriously: Process of Research and Engagement, listed in the supplemental bibliography. The deeper realization that I have witnessed from developing a practice of these tools is that the practice has calmed my fears and allowed me to see fear as a useful guide that I am on to something important to me. Some tools can be used alone, but they become more powerful when used in a community of people trusted to give supportive listening and to share their own desire for clarification in a space of non-judgment. The beauty is that the community building, sharing, and clarity gained for everyone involved works because you practice.

My deeper fears linger in making big mistakes, not the small ones that surface as part of the process, not the small ones that can be used as learning tools and that can help frame the next move, but the big ones that cannot be overcome or have a lasting impact on others in a detrimental way. These are the mistakes I am afraid of making. My rational mind tells me I cannot predict or prevent them. All I can do is be my best self in the presence of creation, so that I can navigate better through the processes. I also know that because I am aware of this concern, I will pay attention

²⁵ Critical Friends: A Process Built on Reflection.
https://depts.washington.edu/ccph/pdf_files/CriticalFriends.pdf

to it. Even though the emotional memory of perfectionism as an expectation of being the first-born lingers, it is freed each time a work-in-progress is shared from a place of gratitude on my part.

Eight weeks ago, I was given an opportunity to attend a weeklong workshop dedicated to leadership development, hosted by Cornell University, and scheduled between my places of employment. During this experience, I witnessed my own clarity of what has been growing inside me for the last three years (January 2015 daily writing) and I crafted my own definition of leadership: I strive to create spaces for people to become their best selves in the context of a larger purpose where each person can find meaning to their contributions. Leadership is grounded in our interconnection of humanity and nature for me. Yet I need to find ways to allow for others to have room for different connections. I seek to inspire them to become their best selves, to help them plant, nurture, and grow the seeds of their wonder, their gifts, in the context of creating a better world.

*Even though worker capacity and motivation are destroyed when leaders choose power over productivity, it appears that bosses would rather be in control than have the organization work well. And this drive for power is supported by the belief that the higher the risk, the more necessary it is to hold power tightly. What's so dangerous about this belief is that just the opposite is true.*²⁶ ~ Margaret Wheatley, author and co-founder and President emerita of The Berkana Institute

Letting Go and Letting Come

I recognize that the critical and creative learning space that I've been thinking about cannot be without grounding in what I wish I had for myself as I explore my own

²⁶ Wheatley, M. (2005). How is your leadership changing? Retrieved from <http://margaretwheatley.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/How-is-Your-Leadership-Changing.pdf>

questions about place in the world. As a good friend recently reminded me, I need to be selective of where and when I spend my energy and efforts so that I do what is most important to me and so that I do good work, so that it doesn't drain me too much, creating blocks for my own work and blocks of support for others. This does not negate the reality that everyone is asked to do less favorite parts of their jobs; they must be done in order to keep a job. Rather, I am suggesting that prioritization of our available choices needs careful consideration and reconsideration as we navigate life. We need to discard the idea of doing everything asked of us to perfectionism and to ask the question of ourselves that helps us determine where to spend our energy and time in alignment with our values, recharging us to be available to support others. The Western culture in which I belong often coins this as selfish time, especially for those who identify as female, adding to the mixed messages of how to live an authentic life against that shaped by external expectations.

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.*²⁷

~ Marianne Williamson, author and co-founder of The Peace Alliance

Yet the support I've received and the courage of heart that it has fostered has been witnessed in several ways. Three years ago, if I had taken a job like this, I do not know if I would have been as comfortable with the discomfort of this kind of

²⁷ Williamson, M. (1996). *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles*. HarperOne.

transition, recognize when actions were not producing desired results, or as willing to try new strategies in light of this awareness. Nor would I have been able to allow actions grown from process in collaborative space to shape outcome, to truly let go and let come what wants to be born from the process. I do not know if I would have been so confident in the slow process, giving myself permission to change my mind, adapt and model the kind of environment I want to create. As part of my interview with Cornell Plantations, and unlike any previous interview in my career, I was able to take risks in sharing where my thinking is and how it came to be here. I took a bigger risk in sharing that I didn't have an answer to the question they posed to me for my 40-minute presentation. Instead, I adopted and shared an approach that my presentation was a work-in-progress that needed their community to become something emergent from us through collaboration. I shared my heart and the personal narrative of how I came to be a person concerned for *how a botanical garden in a world-class university might use its living plant collections to address and interpret contemporary environmental issues*.

Other evidence of how processes have become an integral part of my practice include not hesitating to follow up with a suggestion that I engage people from the place I was transitioning from in a reflection. This activity was intended to help others to see how much and in what ways each one of us contributed to growing our workplace culture and team effectiveness. I was humbled to hear their words and hopeful that they would carry some things forward. I did not think of this action myself, it was suggested to me by my advisor in the SICW program. Yet the experience of doing this supportive and reflective practice did not stir up fear inside me as it might have in the past. Instead, I was able to easily craft and implement the reflection with my peers.

Another example of this connection with heart includes how I quickly realized the framework for my "openness meeting" (as named by one of the staff participants) was not reflecting the idea of supporting them when I was reflecting on how the process might affect the people and the outcome of our meeting. My original

structure might have been perceived as pulling information for an unknown purpose. Considering their history, I needed to pay closer attention to how this was framed, including autonomous feedback opportunities, transparency of my intentions for the meetings, and empowering them to tell me how and what they wanted the next meetings to do. Following up and crafting an email back to participants with a summary of our experience also created the evidence of support and intention. I was able to pay attention during the crafting of the meeting structure by asking myself... what is my deeper intention and is this reflected in the way I'm engaging people?

CHAPTER 6 - GROWING FROM HERE

I'm beginning to understand that courage is not simply being able to act despite fear. Courage is an alignment with heart, rooted in knowing that we are enough as we are. We have value simply because we are. Connecting with heart allows us to speak the deeper truths and questions we feel, know and seek, aligning intention to change the minds of others while authentically honoring the differences of mind. With this kind of courage, I feel more able to find an opening into hearing others and myself as valuable contributors to the beauty of our complex humanity, finding solutions we might not have seen before. For me, there is a growing connection of heart and courage to deconstruct the barrier walls built as part of my narrative and identity. For others, there may be ways to deconstruct the scaffolding that disconnects them with other people and the larger definitions of "other" that may include a new perspective on nature-human relationships.

As I've transitioned into my new place of employment, I've brought my practices with me. The interesting thing is that there is plenty of pull to focus on the day-to-day priorities of my job. The harder thing to do is take the time that it takes to do the deeper work of listening to myself in response to what I'm hearing and seeing around me in this new place. Yet three years ago, I might not have taken the time, or honored the time, with such enthusiasm and deep understanding of its importance. Most likely, I would have allowed the newness and pull of others and of smaller tasks to drive my attention away from this important part of a foundation of how to grow into this place, this vital need for keeping a daily writing journal. As Christina Baldwin explains, writing has changed everything about how I live.

The reason I spend thousands of lifetime hours creating something 99 percent of which no one else is likely to ever read is that writing itself is the gift. Writing organizes the

*mind and the actions that lead from the mind. Over time, the decisions and choices we make in the rush of the moment are informed by the self-knowledge our story gives us. We learn that if we have practiced articulating our story, if we have honored the path to this moment by writing it down, the choices we make are congruent with who we say we are.*²⁸ ~ Christina Baldwin

The attention that I have given to witnessing through my studies of plant identification and ecological relationships and through my photography of the natural world is now being honored across my human expressions. The poet Mary Oliver writes eloquently about this quality of attention in an opening essay of her memoir to her life partner.

*It has frequently been remarked, about my own writings, that I emphasize the notion of attention. This began simply enough: to see that the way the flicker flies is greatly different from the way the swallow plays in the golden air of summer. It was my pleasure to notice such things, it was a good first step. But later, watching M. when she was taking photographs, and watching her in the darkroom, and no less watching the intensity and openness with which she dealt with friends, and strangers too, taught me what real attention is about. Attention without feeling, I began to learn, is only a report. An openness — an empathy — was necessary if the attention was to matter. Such openness and empathy M. had in abundance, and gave away freely... I was in my late twenties and early thirties, and well filled with a sense of my own thoughts, my own presence. I was eager to address the world of words — to address the world with words. Then M. instilled in me this deeper level of looking and working, of seeing through the heavenly visibles to the heavenly invisibles. I think of this always when I look at her photographs, the images of vitality, hopefulness, endurance, kindness, vulnerability... We each had our separate natures; yet our ideas, our influences upon each other became a reach and abiding confluence.*²⁹ ~ Mary Oliver, poet

²⁸ Baldwin, C. (2005). *Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*. Novato, CA: New World Library. p.43.

²⁹ Popova, M. (2015). Mary Oliver on What Attention Really Means and Her Moving Eulogy to Her Soul Mate. from <http://www.brainpickings.org/2015/01/20/mary-oliver-molly-malone-cook-our-world/>

I now see my photography and my new writing practice as two parts of a whole. Even if I only find the time to write in my journal for fifteen minutes a day, I am connecting with my original voice and practicing attention that today feels a bit like stillness commonly associated with mindfulness practices.

Several years later now, I understand why the Center for Digital Storytelling workshops were such a profound experience for me. They honored my visual expression through my photography. They honored a space of learning from our histories. They honored a supportive environment for taking apart and putting back together again things held tightly to my identity. And they created lasting community. The experience of the CCT Dialogue course and being able to spend time digging into the creation of safety for risk taking through many CCT class structures further deepened my appreciation for how important and how difficult these spaces are to make and to hold. During my action research work in the fall of 2014, I conducted a semester of research centered on my clarification of personal narrative story-making in a supportive social space as the connective tissue that supports de-polarizing people's beliefs while supporting cognitive, emotional, and social development alongside metacognitive awareness.³⁰

*Stories move in circles. They don't move in straight lines. So it helps if you listen in circles. There are stories inside stories and stories between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is the getting lost. And when you're lost, you start to look around and to listen.*³¹ ~ Deena Metzger, author

During the later synthesizing process of this research work, I started to understand the importance of building some guiding principles as both a qualitative measure of aligning my practice and my intentions for the envisioned foundational need for

³⁰ Maurer, R. (2014). *Restoring Nature While We Restore Ourselves*, (November). A working paper for CCT692: University of Massachusetts Boston Graduate Program, Science in a Changing World.

³¹ Metzger, D. (1992). *Writing for Your Life: Discovering the Story of Your Life's Journey*. HarperOne.

supportive space. These are adapted with the help of the Center for Digital Storytelling's Workshop Principles³² and personal reflection of application to my own values and beliefs. As I return to these experiences over and over again, I'm now in a place of being able to ground principles around a plan for practice so that important processes can be supported that help me evaluate whether we are [I am] supporting these principles or not.



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³² Lambert, J. (2013). *Seven Stages: Story and the Human Experience*. Digital Diner Press.

These include the importance of:

- Supportive and Confidential Spaces to Allow for Building Trust, Taking Risks and Sharing without Judgment
- Grounding Experiences in Something Common to Being Human
- Discussing Polarized Topics from the Side (gently supporting the value of diversity while allowing for awareness)
- Allowing Enough Time to Dig Deep, Reflect and Put Things Back Together
- Living Ethics Through Process and Practice
- The Process as Important as the End Product
- Ownership and Informed Choices of Participation

Part of the focus of the next daily writing I need to do is to tease out the meaning and possible quantitative values against which I can measure these guiding principles. The complexity sits with the reality that creation of an evaluative method is not done first; rather, they are emergent together and grown from the spiral of practice and evaluation hand in hand.

CHAPTER 7 - REMAINING QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES

*One part is about being grown-up enough, confident enough, fearless enough to face my deepest, most secret dreams and to bring them out into the world. And the other part is to embrace all those forces that seemingly work against those dreams, those burdens I have chosen by the act of living and surrendering myself to those that I love. Celebrate the dreams. Celebrate the burdens, too. For it is in that delicious tension point—where dreams pull forward against the backward draw of one's burdens, where life becomes a beautiful work of art.*³³ ~ Shannon Hayes, author

I continue to develop my journey's mantras that began forming in the Metacognition class of the SICW experience: notice where you are stuck, show up to do the work, pay attention, listen to my truths, live in now, connect with others in the larger context of life, move from thinking about it to action, and let go. Let go of fears grounded outside now when you've done all you can to plan for them. Do not deny them, but realize their proper place, power, and use. Let go so that the gifts you share with the world can become more than you can create on your own. Let go to allow new energy into the process of finding your new openness. As the writer and philosopher Alan Watts suggests, "no work or love will flourish out of guilt, fear, or hollowness of heart, just as no valid plans for the future can be made by those who have no capacity for living now."³⁴

And in the spirit of authenticity, I know that I will be continuing to craft stories, experiencing new insights and sharing community around some deeply interconnected spirals. As I transition out of the SICW program, I anticipate having a different realization about time and my ability to focus, growing something deeply connected with my heart from a space of courage, self-confidence, and self-

³³ Hayes, S. (2014). The Radical Homemaker Turns 40. Retrieved April 14, 2015, from <http://www.yesmagazine.org/blogs/shannon-hayes/the-radical-homemaker-turns-40>

³⁴ Watts, Alan. The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are. 1966. Random House Inc. New York, NY. p.112.

acceptance that has become part of my new braid. Much like an arborist's rope or a high tensile wire, braids are often constructed from a complex of clustered threads that when braided increase the strength of the relationships. During this synthesis, threads that I've started to braid include:

- Crafting and Catching Stories
- The use of Metaphors to Deepen Communication
- Facilitating Shifting My Thinking into Meta-awareness
- Feeding the Roots
- Practices of Contemplative Observation
- Supporting Others in Ways They Need Supported
- The Power and Recognition of Mixed Messages
- Processes to Support my own Clarification
- Practicing without Having or Needing Answers
- Courage to Practice
- Living An Undivided Life
- Tension, Gaps and Intention

As I am writing today, I am witnessing awareness that everything I engage with is grounded in the question of how we want to be with each other in the world and of how I want to be more deeply rooted in the world. These seeds that we all want to plant in our lives and communities also have a collective seed wanting to be born. What support do we need to bring these seeds into reality; what do they require to grow?³⁵ Some of those answers for me are to continue to build these kinds of spaces for inquiry and support beyond the SICW experience. I need to honor the time it will take to sow the right seeds, nurture them, weed around them, and let them grow. So what can I do now to help ensure this happens?

³⁵ Scharmer, O. (2015). U.lab: Transforming Business, Society, and Self Source Book. Notebook for MIT edX course.

In my workplace, several challenges that are with my collaborators and me as we venture to create a vision for Cornell Plantations. These include the disconnect/connection duality of our predominant Western worldview and the realities of working in an Ivy League and Land Grant university where the “hill” of academic and professional achievement often overshadows the stillness required to support development. Adding to this scaffolding complexity is awareness that our connection with nature is framed in the duality of our cultural values. There is a predominant world-view of nature as a resource, creating a duality of connection and disconnection that challenges us with needing alternative ways to explore environmental problem solving. Additionally, the Western idea that conserving nature in a pristine state is possible might even be reinforcing our cultural connection-disconnect dichotomy.

In Western culture, we often seek truth through confrontation. But our headstrong ways of charging at truth scare the shy soul away. If soul truth is to be spoken and heard, it must be approached ‘on the slant.’ I do not mean we should be coy, speaking evasively about subjects that make us uncomfortable, which weakens us and our relationships. But soul truth is so powerful that we must allow ourselves to approach it, and it to approach us, indirectly. We must invite, not command, the soul to speak. We must allow, not force ourselves to listen.³⁶~ Parker Palmer

I have hope that through the practice of listening and witnessing each other’s stories in a supportive space of inquiry, we can begin to create a new collective narrative that supports nature’s health and diversity, humanity’s expression, and cultural diversity. I am speaking of social change, the indirect culmination of many small activities, framing change in unpredictable, but real ways.³⁷ Building upon the belief that personal narratives and the process of creating them (in the context of a social environment supportive of respect building, risk taking, self-revelation, and personal growth) empowers metacognitive awareness through cognitive, emotional

³⁶ Palmer, P. J. (2004). *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

³⁷ Lambert, J. (November 2014). Personal Interview.

and social development. This agency of metacognitive awareness is fundamentally important to growth that opens insights of learned and ingrained narratives that drive behavior. As author and Senior Lecturer at MIT Leadership Center, William Isaacs, states, "The most important parts of any conversation are those that neither part could have imagined before starting."³⁸

In the communities in which I engage, I need to navigate this with the confidence I feel for the processes grounded in my own experiences. I also need to be authentic as a learner of how each person and group will respond differently to what is presented and how. Acknowledging this as part of the experience may support seeing that "one size fits all" is not part of my value system. At Cornell Plantations, I do not think we can make the vision changes we are growing to understand in the gardens and collections without addressing the workplace dynamics and support systems first, to at least consciously move alongside with reflection and adjustments. I do not think we can honestly look at growing these spaces without quickly honoring our awareness of the nature of our name, an offensive remnant of slavery around the world. Our humanities cannot be left out of the efforts to find solutions to our problems.

So at the root of this bigger question is how do I want to lead this change... not just what I do I want to change? From the ULab edX MOOC (massive online, open course), Otto Scharmer suggests that there are roots of enabling infrastructures at the center of all visions/projects.

- Creating New Learning Environments that Link Heart, Mind and Hand
- Creating New Platforms of Collaborations
- Knowledge Creation between Science, Consciousness, and Social Change

³⁸ Isaacs, W. (1999). *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. New York, NY.

People with high level of personal mastery live in a continual learning mode. They never 'arrive'. Sometimes, language, such as the term 'personal mastery' creates a misleading sense of definiteness, of black and white. But personal mastery is not something you possess. It is a process. It is a lifelong discipline. People with a high level of personal mastery are acutely aware of their ignorance, their incompetence, and their growth areas. And they are deeply self-confident. Paradoxical? Only for those who do not see the 'journey is the reward'.³⁹ ~ Peter Senge, Senior lecturer at MIT Sloan School of Management and the founder of the Society for Organizational Learning

As I am crafting the final draft of my synthesis, the idea of paying attention to my true self is surfacing because I am witnessing deep emotions connected with finishing. I miss time behind the camera, I miss time with my partner, and I miss time with nature. I see and feel more clearly that stillness is the most important action I need to take right now during this intense synthesis semester. I have struggled with enough time for stillness to recharge my energy and my spirit. The pull of learning a new job, the depth of the problems within the culture of this new workplace, not having a manager's role filled yet for the gardening staff, shopping for a house, and writing this synthesis have necessarily put some of my attention for my own health, well-being, and support for my life partner aside. Yet I've continued to search and find the right kind of supportive space in relationships, physical spaces for writing, and sitting in nature to renew my courage and energy for the work. This stillness is fundamentally important so that I can better choose the right actions aligned with my heart.

With this realization, it may also be important to consider actions related to removing additional time absorbers not centered in living the life I want or those seeded in my own personal narratives as false truths. This may involve asking others to be an active listener, life coach or Critical Friend to help tease out clarity. For me now, it involves building my listening with my life partner with more

³⁹ Senge, P. (1994). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization*. Doubleday Business.

attention. It may involve letting go of my personal expectations, past narratives, or professional relationships, when they no longer serve to support my best self. My challenge ahead is to continue to nurture the right seeds of community and the stillness of the soil for my replenishment after these three years of intense focus. Another challenge is to not allow the past narrative of my experience in public horticulture to frame what is in front of me today. I need to craft or join a supportive community of fellow writers and continue to practice the tools I have gained in the SICW program, in my workplace, and personal life. I am intensely aware that the journey is the gift and that the SICW experience will continue to help me decide the most important support, communities, and actions I need if only I attend to the stillness and listen.



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Lost

*Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.*

~ David Wagoner from Collected Poems 1956-1976

APPENDIX

While it is not my intention to duplicate what Peter Taylor and Jeremy Szteiter have outlined in their book, Taking Yourself Seriously: Processes of Research and Engagement, which provides guidelines for each of the tools below, I will speak of how these tools have been used outside my SICW classroom experience and the connections I see with building courage for my continued journey. These are not an inclusive list of tools experienced in the SICW program; they are a list of those that have grown deeply into my practice, knowing that others will sprout again later.

Daily Writing

The practice of 15-30 minutes of writing new words in a journal each day has been essential to building the foundation of my research clarity. This has not been without struggle to make the time to craft new words. Competing priorities, the pull of getting daily chores done, and wanting to be supportive of others in both my personal and professional life sometimes find me working from home. The new words are not always immediately evident in how they may relate to my current thinking or research. But they are necessary in the *process* of creating clarity, even if the majority of the words never find their way into any shared writing.

Dialogue Process

Perhaps this is the single most profound experience, practice, and tool that grounded my confidence for process in spaces of potential tension. With practice and intention, I have not only gained confidence in facilitating dialogues in the

classroom, but have extended those practices to my workplace, modifying the exact process to allow for time constraints, and using components of the process to open and close circles of exploratory inquiry where other tools may fit in between. What I realize from using this process is that it needs constant practice to remain proficient. Yet, much like riding a bicycle, once you can lead this process without a supplemental guide, and once you begin living the principles behind the process, you can facilitate its use effectively in many alternative environments. Practicing dialogue and practicing its facilitation help to practice listening and attention; this is the underlying skill that builds the confidence and courage to continue to practice in new places of engagement. The dialogue need not focus solely in places of known tension. Rather, building dialogue practice in spaces of support, like the Writing Workshops experienced in the research and synthesis classes in the SICW program, offers us spaces to practice and build confidence in the process without the added complexity of divided tension.

Focused Conversation

During one of our recruitment efforts, I used the concept of the focused conversation to help me navigate a complex series of interviews for a vacancy. Knowing from past experience that a stakeholder group might have some bias to navigate around one of the internal applicants, I decided to try out the ORID (objective, reflective, interpretive, decisional) tool as a way to understand and move through my thinking carefully. The experience in class built my practice and understanding of the value this tool might use in finding blind spots in our thinking. I found both personal benefit and an opening of thinking among group members when I was able to share the why and how I came to interpretations through observations made. Instead of writing down the interviewee's responses to our questions, I wrote down observations about how each one responded or engaged with the group or individuals present. At the end of our interviews, I shared the process I used to help me navigate the complexity of the interview while sharing the

insights I gained. For me, the transparency of this is as important as the insights gained since no learning is without bias. An important depth of understanding gained was not only the value of practicing these tools in order to better understand how they work in different circumstances, but also how they work for me personally before introducing them to others in a facilitative role.

Freewriting

Freewriting has been a practice I have used since my first experience with it early in my graduate studies, but its frequency of use and where it is used is growing in my practice. I started by using it primarily in preparation for engagement in online classes. Then I found myself using it in preparation for writing assignments, and then in preparation for important discussions at work. Yet all of these have been practiced in private, with the exception of guided freewriting in some of the SICW classes or NewSCC workshops. Granted, the nature and principle of freewriting is to bring yourself into a state of present awareness and to unlock thinking just below the surface, so I'm not suggesting that the content of freewriting become public. Rather that introducing the concept and process with others has been something that I have only begun sharing with a few people at work as a practice around preparing for important meetings. Freewriting has been successful in its intent, although I don't have any other evaluative measure than my "in the moment" realization that it facilitates its immediate purpose of helping to clarify my intent or hopes.

Making Space for Taking Initiative in and Through Relationships

When I first repeatedly experienced the idea of making space for taking initiative in and through relationships, I spent my attention on the actions of relationship building in support of my graduate studies. I took time to clarify what teachers in

the SICW program expected of me since the space of problem-based learning and self-guided inquiry was foreign in my classroom experience. I took time to negotiate and build work relationships around time off from work and provided copies of my work to my supervisor to help him understand what I was spending my time on. This attention was primary to allow me to let go of the anxiety I felt about my studies of interest and my performance. I suffered what I now know to be common to many graduate students, imposter syndrome. Only after the Metacognition class have I realized more deeply how this feeling relates to my feeling of being different than classmates throughout my childhood years. But trying to stay on topic, the practice of actions that I've taken for each class, each semester, and each place of employment has allowed me to dig deeper into understanding that the making space part is a space of tension. For me, it is about learning how to not feel flustered that my time should be spent elsewhere. It is about looking at how the things that seem in tension may be related, so that I know my actions are having impact on the things in tension! Maybe working on one thing helps hold space for the other.

Mapping

The making of maps to outline ideas and their relationships often helps me share my thinking in a way that allows others to speak to the relationships they see, opening me to thinking differently about what I have visualized through the process of making the map. The process of making the map often stirs up the possibilities of connections that I may not have made from my initial thinking. I often learn better with visual metaphors. Through the process of making and sharing thinking maps, I have come to appreciate that they also help me communicate and clarify my own thinking with others. They can be relatively quick to put together and allow me to play with ideas that are less fixed than writing words on a sheet of paper. I have come to prefer the use of Post-It® notes to move themes or ideas around, later seeing patterns that may evolve into a drawing. The freedom of creating and

sharing ideas without any expectation of perfectionism is easily applied with this tool.

Personal and Professional Development Workbook

This concept is different than a simple journal for me because I see this workbook as focused on a project or focused on a particular problem I want to address. I experienced the process of keeping this kind of workbook in the three research classes in the SICW program, Metacognition, Processes of Research and Engagement, and Action Research. Keeping this kind of journal allowed me to organize my thinking in a chronology of processes. The real value in keeping the notebooks was revisiting them. There is value in flipping back through old ideas to see what you've been thinking in order to see anew -- seeing new connections, alternate possibilities, different directions, depths of tensions, clarity or synergy, etc. You have to revisit them in order to make the most of them. These are connected with the mixed messages (both those I've built and recognized in my experience of living) of believing in myself as an agent of change, of having a written record of my objectives, of my thinking and accomplishments which helps keep me from dismissing the impact I've had. This also reminds me of them later, building courage to continue difficult work. As I transition into the role of developing a new vision for Cornell Plantations, I intend to keep this kind of workbook alongside Daily Writing.

Plus Delta Feedback

I appreciate and I wonder, these are two very powerful questions to ask and give as feedback for our work. My first experience with this frame was during our work-in-progress presentations in the SICW program, since they were built into many of the classes as mid-progress thinking strategies. I also experienced the possible brevity of this feedback frame during many of the four-week Collaborative Explorations that

were hosted by the program outside of regular coursework. This brevity did not dilute the power of this kind of feedback. The frame of "what I appreciate" and "what I wonder" held a space of support for the person receiving feedback and focused the person giving feedback to listen differently than if listening for his or her own benefit alone. I have grown this practice into how I frame feedback for my own workplace meetings. I have witnessed again and again how having a simple frame around how to give feedback changes the dynamic of how open people are to receiving it.

Sharing of Work to Elicit Responses and Works In Progress

Sharing Works-in-Progress (WIP) has been built into many of the SICW classes, Collaborative Explorations, and New England Workshop on Science and Social Change. Even though I have years of experience presenting topics and teaching adult education classes, I have always struggled with the anxiety of presenting. The anxiety of performance is part of that, but the deeper anxiety sits in the perfectionism I've struggled with since childhood. Each and every WIP was built by the facilitator and supported by the participants with the frame of being a space where responses would be offered to help the growth of our work. And each WIP built a little more trust that this kind of space would not hold me to having something perfectly thought through. During my last 3-4 classes in the program, I have transitioned to a feeling of looking forward to the WIP presentations, knowing I will gain clarity with my work and knowing that others will support me in that process. I've gained so much comfort with this knowing that I risked presenting a WIP for a job interview, contributing to my position as top candidate. The depth of my wanting this kind of space connects with the practice/play of music and making art that was deeply ingrained in my childhood. I now recognize how powerful this space is alongside the realization of how few places like this exist in adult life. I want to help facilitate spaces with this kind of intentional support for others. In my

immediate future, this seems most likely in my peer group of Cornell Plantations Directors and the Horticulture team I guide.

Supportive Listening

Through multiple attentions to practicing this type of listening, I have gained the insight that this tool intends gentle guidance in support of the teller. There are many ways this can be done, yet I prefer to offer focus on the teller, allowing natural space for silence and carefully crafting and executing questions to support them in finding their own clarification and possible solutions to their problem. The exercise and the comments from other observers to my practice helped me value this tool and appreciate that this might be important to my own understanding of the process as well as the transparency in how I might offer listening to others. This also connects with what a fellow traveler on life's journey to find purpose helped me understand – that this kind of conversation is rare and empowering for the teller. Most striking was this experienced facilitator's comment that the practice is difficult as the listener, knowing what questions to ask when, knowing when to support silence, and reading the subtle language of the teller (not just words).

Julian Weissglass, Director of the Center for Educational Change in Mathematics and Science and Professor of Mathematics at the University of California, Santa Barbara, defines many forms of listening, such as active, passive, inattentive, pretend, conversational, argumentative and informational, before suggesting a definition for constructivist listening as "one that is for the benefit of the talker. The goals are to encourage the talker to reflect on the meaning of events and ideas, express and work through feelings that are interfering with clearer thinking, construct new meanings, and make decisions."⁴⁰ Yet I feel this term of constructivist is a bit too

⁴⁰ [Weissglass](#), J. (1990). "Constructivist listening for empowerment and change." *The Educational Forum* 54(4): 351-370.

laced with structural undertones to fully explain the flexibility and adaptability the listener too must practice in order to support the talker in the process.

I can only speculate that this natural growth into supportive listening for others is growing because of paying attention to listening to self. I am choosing to become a better listener. It might be possible to practice being a better listener to myself and have that translate into better listening for others. I have found in recent dialogues the ability to listen to what I am and am not saying (and taking notes with this focus) as a kind of awareness note taking that can be later revisited in reflection. I find myself toggling between attentive listening to what is placed in the space and attentive listening to myself.

Think-Pair-Share

Think-Pair-Share might be an alternative to a go around of individual Check-ins (see Taylor and Szteiter's book). Implementation can be easily structured when co-hosting or organizing meetings. Think-Pair-Share might work in the meetings as a way to build more respect among participants, to give structure to the need to share, and to offer more equity at the table. Additionally, Group Zap or other Post-It® note connecting activities offer ways to synthesize information in community.

Just a year ago I wrote about feeling not quite comfortable with this tool yet, having only experienced it a few times. Adding to my discomfort was realizing the experience of using Group Zap was experimental each time – so it was difficult to feel confident that it gave rise to the intended principles and feelings of engagement and creative learning. Yet in the first month of employment with Cornell Plantations, I have used this as a way to support people being heard when large groups of people were in attendance at meetings. Part of the success was having a bigger process the activity fit into while sharing the hopes of what we might do with what we learn.

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